

THE CURSE OF BERLIN A CONVERSATION WITH ADEKEYE ADEBAJO

EURO—VISION is an art-led enquiry that explores the extractivist gaze of European institutions and its policies. The relationship between international relations, trade, economic policy and military operations come into focus through the lens of Critical Raw Materials. In 2008, the European Commission adopted the Critical Raw Materials Initiative, which defined a strategy for accessing resources viewed as imperative to the EU's subsistence. The criticality of resources is measured according to supply risk and economic importance. Policies are drawn up to ensure the continued availability of materials deemed critical. Such policies have led to agreements guiding the biological and geological exhaustion of the Global South. The [current list](#), revised in 2020, includes 30 materials, including Silica, Cobalt Natural Rubber, Phosphate rock, and the newly added Lithium and Titanium.

HOW CAN WE UNDERSTAND EXTRACTION BEYOND THE REMOVAL AND DISPLACEMENT OF MINERALS – TO ENCOMPASS POLICIES, INTERNATIONAL TREATIES AND REGULATIONS THAT IMPOSE CONTROVERSIAL FORMS OF STEWARDSHIP OF NATURAL RESOURCES ON COMMUNITIES?

EURO—VISION focuses on the inscriptive operations of initiatives such as the establishment of Free Trade Zones (FTZs), fisheries partnerships agreements (FPAs), and de-risking investment tools like public-private partnerships (PPPs). In doing so, FRAUD proposes to consider these agreements through the lens of Critical Raw Materials, as well as to incorporate a wider set of 'materials', such as labour and fish(eries). We argue that the latter are managed as resources to be extracted, and that understanding them as critical raw materials as defined by governmental bodies helps to understand how their plunder is mobilised and institutionalised. More importantly, this framework enables us to look beyond these practices to the possibility of thinking and doing otherwise.

The following text is based on a conversation with Professor Adekeye Adebajo, the first in the EURO—VISION [podcast series](#).

The series begins with a focus on the history of extraction between the European and the African continent, which has laid the groundwork for the Critical Raw Materials Initiative to take shape. A crucial way to understand current infrastructures of power and inequality are to examine their genealogies, that is to say, to consider various historical events, whether climactic, social or political, that have shaped our current cosmology. We are extending this to understand the foundation of the European Union integration. Thus we follow what theorists such as Sylvia Wynter have posited, which is that to understand current cosmologies we must examine how they have taken shape. One such key event is the Berlin Conference (1884-85), led by the Chancellor of Germany, Otto von Bismarck, during which the heads of 14 states, none of which were from Africa, assembled to discuss the partition of the African continent. This meeting which occurred a century and a half ago continues to shape Africa's borders today, as well as its governance, its economy, its international relations, and the extraction of its materials. The latter of which is often either towards Europe, or to incur profit towards European-owned companies.

PROF. ADEBAJO speaks about the importance of this event in contemporary international affairs, most notably in 'The Curse of Berlin: Africa after the Cold War', in which he details the extent of von Bismarck's legacy. The following is an excerpt of his manuscript which introduces the Berlin Conference.

“That conference began in snow-filled Berlin, on Saturday 15th November, 1884. Fourteen largely Western powers - Germany, France, Britain, Portugal, Belgium, Spain, Italy, Russia, Austria-Hungary, the United States, Denmark, Sweden-Norway¹, the Netherlands and Turkey attended the meeting. This conference, at which Africa’s fate was effectively sealed, was held in a music room with a large chandelier, red curtains and grey marble pillars, the site of the famous Congress of Berlin that had settled European continental quarrels six years earlier, at Bismarck’s official residence in Wilhelmstrasse. Significantly, no African representatives were present around the horseshoe table, even as delegates discussed the continent’s

future, with a map of Africa in the background of the room. European princes, barons, counts and lords met in Berlin to set the rules for a continent’s partition without even considering any indigenous African presence necessary. This was despite the legal fiction of treaties having earlier been agreed with many African leaders. Germany’s iron Chancellor started the conference with a speech in French, that championed Livingstone’s three Cs: commerce, Christianity and civilisation. Bismarck disingenuously argued that the conference aimed to promote the civilisation of the natives by opening up Africa’s interior to commerce and Christianity. He outlined the three main goals of the meeting: promote free trade in the Congo, ensure free navigation on the Congo and the Niger, and agree on rules for future annexation of African territories. The Chancellor ended by hoping the meeting would serve the cause of peace and humanity.”²

FRAUD This scene sets the stage for us to discuss this momentous event in history, that still follows us today, or still haunts us, to use the words of your book. You have largely explained the implications and the problems for security and governance that stemmed from the aftermath of these partitions and trade agreements, resulting from the Berlin conference. You also explained how the worldview in which such a plunder was validated was based on this notion of the African continent being defined as a *res nullius* by European imperialists, that is an empty land ripe for the picking, so to speak. This may explain how the officially stated outcomes really differ from the actual outcome for the conference. You mentioned that the officially stated outcome of the conference was free access for all Western nations to Africa’s interior, free trade in the Congo basin, and consideration for the welfare of the “native races” in providing them with the benefits of “civilisation”; while in fact, it was the agreement to a performative peace in Europe, by diverting inner rivalries which were dependent upon the right of extraction in Africa, and this has also been dubbed *Eurafrique*, or the Eurafrikan vision, which we will return to later. You have described how the Berlin Conference has immensely changed the continent politically, economically, culturally, and even physiologically, and has also of course changed governance radically. Could you outline for us the main changes, based on the tenets of your book, which are security, hegemony and unity, in the African continent as a result of the Berlin Conference?

¹ This was one country at the time.

² Adebajo, p. 14.

PROF. ADEBAJO Thanks very much. I think it's important, this book was published about a decade ago, and my thinking has also been shaped not just by colonialism and the Berlin Conference, which I'll of course focus on, but also by the four centuries of European slavery that preceded the Berlin Conference. We mustn't forget that Africans were commodified and sent as human chattel across the Atlantic, to the Americas and the Caribbean as part of this sordid slave trade. These were some of the most productive Africans that were sent overseas to work as slaves, free labour effectively, for America and Europe's industrialisation. This not only depopulated the continent, but also destroyed the agricultural sector in many cases, and destroyed entrepreneurship within Africa. I think we must also remember that colonialism, and what culminated in the Berlin Conference, was actually perfected during at least two and a half centuries of introducing colonialism to the Caribbean and to Latin America as well. And with the European powers, the same European powers having perfected that system of colonialism elsewhere, they were then able to undertake a century of colonialism within Africa itself, from which the slaves had originally been taken. I think the impact was quite similar for not just Africa, but also the Caribbean and Latin America as well. The way that I look at the Berlin Conference is to look at it through what I call the twin plagues of European locusts – slavery and colonialism – a kind of destruction over five centuries.

I then look at the impact on Africa over a century, and I argue that Africa has been forced, as a result of the Berlin Conference, to embark on the quest for three magic kingdoms, and it hasn't really achieved any of these elusive kingdoms, and keeps trying as a result of the legacies of Berlin. Some of these legacies include the fact that raw materials were introduced into Africa. Cash crops, palm oil – they were basically growing things for the European market, not for the African market, or even for domestic consumption, and that's very important in terms of the kind of extractive economies with which your series is dealing. Sixteen landlocked countries were also introduced to Africa, the highest number of any continent, as a result of the arbitrary borders that were drawn up in Berlin. This fight over borders led to over 10 million deaths in the first 40 post-independence years in Africa, as wars erupted in places like the Congo, Nigeria, and Sudan, largely as a result of these colonial boundaries that were arbitrarily drawn. Then, culturally of course, there was a devastating impact, with Christian missionaries often supporting

the colonial project. They not only dismissed African religions, basically as paganism, they destroyed and damaged much of indigenous African culture. That included indigenous systems of conflict resolution at local levels, and indigenous systems of rulership in Africa, in places like Nigeria - the Benin kingdom - in Ghana, you have the Asante kingdom. In places like Sudan as well, they may not have been perfect democratic systems, but at least built into some of them were systems of accountability, where the monarch could not just rule without consultation, and could in some cases actually be destooled.

Of the three kingdoms that I talk about in the book, first of all the Berlin Conference had an impact on African security. I've tried to tie this to the legacy of Berlin, as I've explained, countries and peoples that didn't belong to each other were amalgamated, borders were drawn up arbitrarily, and thus resulted in conflicts. The fact that these political systems that were put in place in Africa, basically imported from Westminster, from France, from Belgium, very late in the day, only in the last 12 to 15 years of colonial rule, did not prepare these countries for self-rule. In many cases, in places like the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Tanzania, I think there were less than a hundred university graduates in these countries. University education was also introduced very late in the day to most of these countries, in the late 1940s. They were therefore ill-prepared for self-rule, and on top of that had systems that were inappropriate to the situations into which they were being introduced. That first kingdom, for Pax Africana, what a Kenyan academic Ali Mazrui calls it, is a peace that is created and consolidated by Africans themselves. That quest has been frustrated, and also the quest for finding proper governance systems that aren't alien to Africa, that's the first quest. The second quest has to do with hegemony, or leadership, and that has to do with the fact that countries like France, the US especially, and China more recently, have continued to meddle and intervene in Africa, and have thus also prevented Africa from being able to find its own political and economic models and systems. Not that Africa should not interact with these countries and trade with them, as European countries trade with China, but it shouldn't be done in such a one-sided, and in some ways a neo-colonial fashion, especially when you consider the way France has continued to treat Africa in the post-colonial era.

FRAUD I was thinking about specifically what you have said in relation to the contemporary situation, with the US, China and France, because

you've also written about this of course, and the way in which you write about how it's a game, that Africa is the stage where these powers are playing. If we think about a theatrical stage, Africa again appears to be a stage where the interests of these countries are being played out. With the Berlin Conference, it was mostly European countries, but now you're talking about Africa as a continent (which is itself a kind of construction), but being a stage for worldwide actors as well such as China, Russia and the US. What are the implications for the continent in becoming a stage?

PROF. ADEBAJO Absolutely. I mean I've often talked about this as a drama, which during the Cold War years involved two superpower clowns and a French gendarme. So it really was a play, where France was basically shuffling around regimes like a deranged poker player, you know. Africa was the *chasse gardée*, it was a private hunting ground from which trespassers were basically prevented from entering. And in some cases France, in the Central African Republic for example, after Emperor Bokassa, one of the French-supported dictators who had embarrassed France and killed schoolchildren, in 1979 they flew in a former president, David Dacko to take over from Bokassa. There were lots of coups that were either instigated by France, or military interventions to defend certain dictators like Idriss Déby in Chad. So that really was a stage, in true fashion. Likewise with the US as well, there were leaders like Somalia's Siad Barre, and in Liberia, Samuel Doe, who were supported by the US, and in the Congo, Mobutu Sese Seko, the 31-year dictator of the Congo, was supported by the US, France and Belgium in particular. The Soviet Union also had its own favourites that it supported, in Ethiopia for example Mengistu, for ideological reasons as well. You cannot underestimate that history, and in Southern Africa, liberation movements were either supported by the Soviet Union or by the US, and in some cases by Cuba, in the case of Angola. Africa was a geo-strategic playground, and a lot of African states were pawns on chessboards that were moved around by different puppeteers. The notion of Africa as a game is important, and still continues to some extent in the contemporary era as well. The related point that I make in the book is that Africa needs to develop its own local hegemony; leaders that can basically fence off the continent from these meddling external powers. I look particularly at post-apartheid South Africa, and also Nigeria. Nigeria was able to embark on peacekeeping missions in

the 1990s that more or less were able to stabilise both Liberia and Sierra Leone. South Africa also contributed greatly to peacekeeping in the Congo and Burundi in the post-apartheid era. So I look at these potential local hegemony, and the possibility of them basically being able to promote security, being able to also promote regional integration within their own sub-regions, because South Africa and Nigeria account for over 60% of the economies of Southern and West Africa. However, my conclusion is that these local hegemony have basically not been able to both fence off Africa from the more negative aspects of these external powers, and they lack the capacity to be able to stabilise and spread prosperity to their own sub-regions themselves.

My final elusive kingdom is one of unity. Here I look at the failures of the Organisation of African Unity, and the African Union which was born in 2002, and I contrast it to the European Union. In the case of the European Union, the European Economic Community was born in 1957 as an outcome of the Second World War that had nearly destroyed Europe, and there was a basic bargain between French agriculture and German industry. The idea was effectively to prevent war between France and Germany. And they were able to, through gradual co-operation and spill-overs of that functionality, to be able to create a 27-member body, having started from six, that is now the most successful case of a supra-national regional integration body in the world. I look at the potential of Africa to be able to create a similar institution, if not at the continental level of the African Union, then perhaps at more sub-regional levels, with the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS), or the Southern African Development Community (SADC). But Africa has so far not been successful. Then finally, I look at the potential of Africa to use the alliance with the Asians that was crafted at the Bandung Conference in 1955, to be able to reduce their dependence on the West. For example, can Africa use the presence of China as the second largest economy in the world to be able to get better deals from Western countries like France, the US, Britain, and Belgium? That has not, unfortunately, worked, and I also look at the potential of Africa to use its diaspora, in America in particular, to be able to promote development. You know, African-Americans have invested in countries like Liberia, they've gone back to live in countries like Ghana, they've invested in South Africa, but there hasn't really been any systematic approach, and there are also tens of thousands of highly educated Africans in the US, and I look at the potential of that group to be able to play the same kind of role, for example, as the Jewish

American lobby in the US in influencing US policy in positive directions. However, despite the fact we had an African-American president in the White House from 2009 to 2016 – Barack Obama - I argue that this final quest has actually still remained very elusive.

FRAUD I want to look at the question of sorcery, because it's something I think is quite important in how the narration of your book is staged. You cast von Bismarck as the sorcerer, who has cursed Africa by dividing it, and in turn, this has then cursed Europe, through a war and also its own internal division. We have really enjoyed that you portray the statesman as a witch or a sorcerer. I like to think of him as a witch, embedded in this idea of non-modern ontologies, which is of course the reversal of the usual othering of these traditional knowledges. I was thinking, for example, how Marx had cast the bourgeoisie as a maleficent sorcerer. In the case of Marx, we have one specific type of European understanding of witchcraft, which is the same that has been used to other and to also discredit traditional knowledge systems, which I think in your case is quite different. You also speak in the book about Christianity, the curse of Adam and Eve, and you mention the importance of the culture of the curse in Africa. I was wondering if you would be able to explain a little bit more about how exactly you employ and understand sorcery throughout 'The Curse of Berlin'.

PROF. ADEBAJO Thanks. I think what was interesting for me is, you know, a lot of Africans, widespread throughout, still consult with traditional healers, maybe up to 60% of Africans. And so, I didn't want to adopt just an elitist view, I wanted to also link some of my views to traditional beliefs, which we still see throughout the continent. You can see that in Nollywood films that are made by Nigerians. Of course I'm using it figuratively, but I love the idea of alchemy, for example, in Europe, trying to turn lead into gold, and eventually discovering the scientific method. And Bismarck, being widely seen as a geopolitical grandmaster in Europe, almost as if he cast a spell on other European powers in the way he moved things around his chessboard, was able to control European diplomacy for over two decades. I described him actually as a wizard, rather than a witch. This idea of a grand wizard, who is employing geopolitical sorcery, is one that I thought was quite a nice way of playing around and describing what these European countries were actually doing to

Africa. You are just casting a spell on the continent and moving it around like pawns on your geopolitical chessboard. The curse that Bismarck imposed on Africa was the division of Africa into these balkanised mini-states, many of whom were not really viable in the post-independence era. I then turn that around to describe a curse by Africa's ancestors on Europe, where basically Europe turned on itself during the First World War, within 30 years after the Berlin Conference, and 9 million of its youth were killed during the First World War. But I go even further to note that the division of both Germany and Europe after the Second World War was another curse inflicted on Europe by Africa's ancestors. Just as Bismarck had divided Africa, Africa's ancestors were now dividing both Germany and Europe. And of course after the Berlin Wall fell, that curse of Africa's ancestors was lifted, but I argued that the Bismarckian curse that had divided Africa, the legacy of that still continues in Africa itself. So I guess I'm just playing around with those kind of images and analogies and things like that, but I completely agree with you, one can also turn some of these things around. The stereotyping of the West against the others, that Edward Said and Chinua Achebe and others have fleshed out so vividly, is something that we can also use, to use language to turn on Europeans in a type of 'empire strikes back' way.

FRAUD Yes, absolutely. In another interview with the Community of Sub-Saharan Migrants (CSSM), that are based in Rabat, they talk about how Europe needs to leave African politics, to stop placing people in power, or to back certain governments, so that Africa can have its own governance. They also say that they view that as having a huge impact on migration. I just wanted to mention that to emphasise the point that you made about the importance of independent governance. Now, what are your thoughts on Bismarck's vision and the concept of *Eurafrique*, or Eurafrica?

PROF. ADEBAJO *Eurafrique*, as I understand it, was actually developed in the 1930s by both Italian and French academics, and the basic idea was that Europe should expand to the Mediterranean and take advantage of the raw materials that existed outside of Europe. Thus Africa could provide the raw materials for Europe. Lord Lugard who had created Nigeria in 1914, Mother Nigeria, also talked about the dual mandate where Africa provided raw materials, and Europe provided manufactured goods and the rule of

law to Africa. In some way that was also a version of *Eurafrique*. Then Hitler's economy minister, Hjalmar Schacht, came up also with the idea of *Eurafrique*, as a way for Germany to take back its colonies in Eastern Africa and Southern Africa that it had lost after the First World War, and basically using them to boost Europe's economy. I think finally, France has actually been the greatest practitioner and proponent of *Eurafrique* in the post-independence era. There was a 'FrançAfrique' that was declared, and it basically involved France signing secret military accords with African countries that permitted bases to be deployed there, and for France to intervene in those countries to keep regimes intact. There was also the Franc CFA which was the currency of about 22 of the francophone African countries, which was basically tied to the French franc, and is still actually tied to the Euro today. France kept all their [currency] reserves in France, and basically would even provide aid, and sometimes pay salaries of civil servants in the Francophone countries as a way of preserving neo-colonial influence. Also culturally, France held film festivals in Burkina Faso, and had all sorts of cultural initiatives through the Alliance Française and other bodies. The final thing I want to mention is France actually signed agreements with these countries that made them basically sell to France their uranium, in places like Niger, their cobalt, and all sorts of raw materials had to be sold to France on an automatic basis. This was the very embodiment of *Eurafrique* in the post-independence era.

FRAUD Thank you. How did the division of Africa that resulted from the Berlin Conference itself mirror a geography of extraction?

PROF. ADEBAJO It did, in the French colonies more than most. You know the Suez crisis of 1956 was a really important crisis, because in that case the Americans and Russians ganged up, and basically forced France and Britain, along with Israel, to give up their seizure of the Suez canal from Egypt's Nasser. And Britain drew the lesson from there that the world had changed, and that it was no longer a great power, and needed to play within the rules of the US-led alliance. France drew the opposite conclusion, that it still needed to keep playing a *politique de grandeur*, and maintain its influence, and there was a very strong statement by Mitterrand, who said that without Africa, France would not have a role to play as a great power in the 20th century. Very powerful statement, and so what was effectively a

folie de grandeur continued to dazzle people in Africa and elsewhere, but France really could not maintain the illusion of being a great power, since after the Second World War it was not really a viable great power of any sort, even though it kept its seat on the UN Security Council with its veto. Unlike France, in British colonies, they actually diversified their relations to American, Soviet and other countries. Those markets changed, and there were companies outside of Britain, even if some British companies maintained a dominant foothold. Belgium, though, I will add similar to France, tried to maintain that foothold in the Congo, and still does try today, in economical terms, and its Union Minière company remained the most dominant company there.

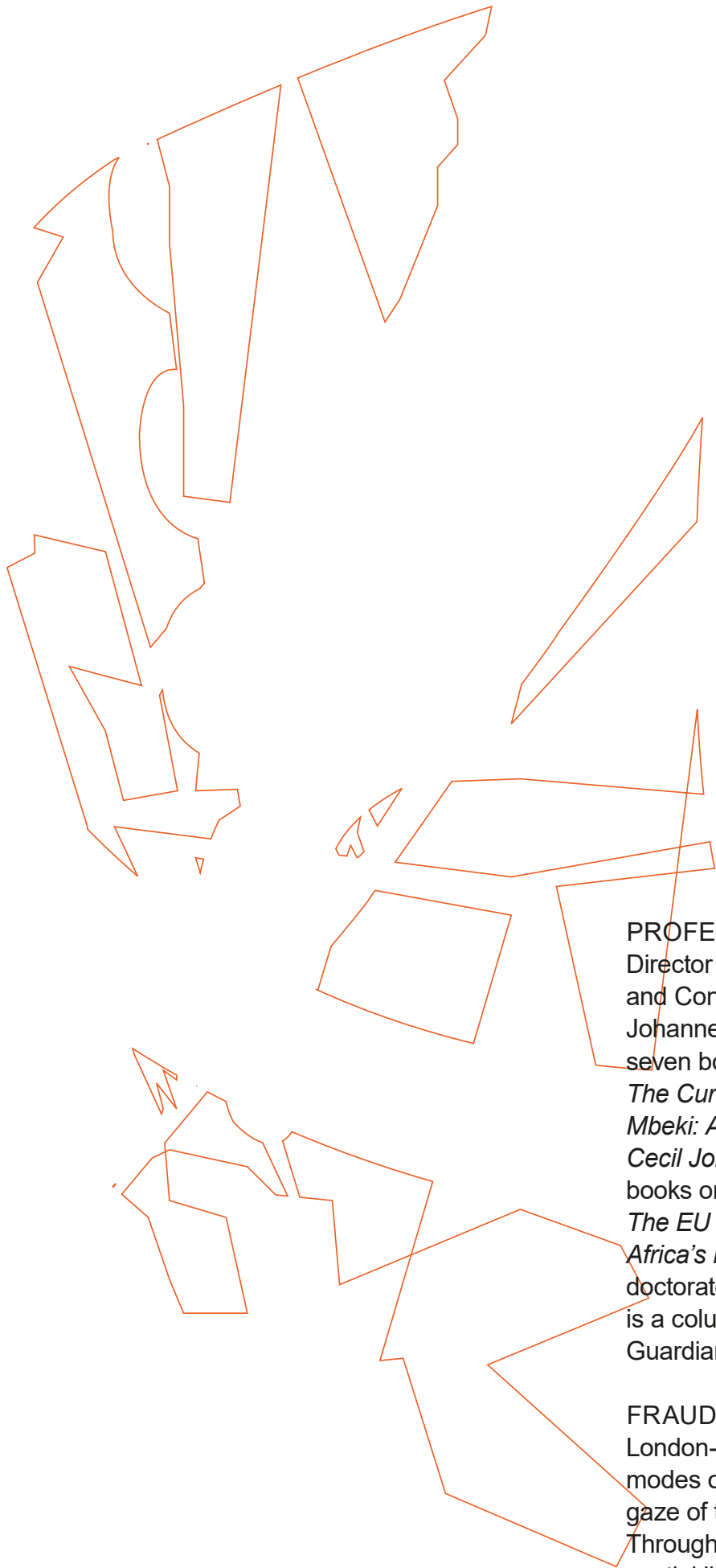
FRAUD Thank you for explaining the importance of the Berlin conference in shaping not only Africa's borders, but also its governance, its economy, international relations, and crucially, the extraction of its materials for European manufacture and consumption. We will continue to expand upon this idea of *Eurafrica*, and its role in the foundation of the EU in the next episode. For now, thank you Prof. Adebajo for contributing to our EURO—VISION series. We refer our readers to your most recent publications, *The Pan-African Pantheon: Prophets, Poets, and Philosophers*³ published by Manchester University Press and *The Trial of Cecil John Rhodes*⁴, published by Jacana Media. Thank you.

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³ Adebajo, *The Pan-African Pantheon*.

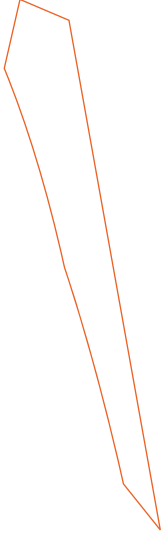
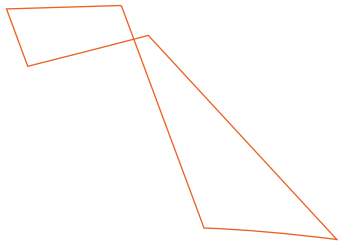
⁴ Adebajo, *The Trial of Cecil John Rhodes*.



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FRAUD (Audrey Samson & Francisco Gallardo) is a London-based duo of artist/researchers which develop modes of art-led enquiry that examine the extractive gaze of the European Union's institutions and policies. Through their practice, FRAUD cultivate critical spatial literacy and cosmogony building. [@la_fraud](#)

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